

TO: Vermont Government Operations Committees

FROM: Alison Segar, Vermont Language Justice Project

RE: Summary of Vermont Language Justice Project Success & Recommendations for State of Vermont to Address Gaps in State Services with Comprehensive Planning for Language Access for Emergency and Government Services for All Vermonters

My name is Alison Segar, and I am the Director of the Vermont Language Justice Project.

How we started.

The project began in March 2020 when the country was beginning to shut down from Covid, and I realized that the only information available to Vermonters about this public health emergency was in English, both locally and nationally.

I launched the Vermont Multi-Lingual Coronavirus Task Force, a volunteer effort to create educational videos with basic facts about Covid-19 in multiple languages. The first video was recorded by phone, uploaded to a new YouTube channel, and shared with Somali and Somali Bantu contacts through social media and WhatsApp.

The task force of over 40 community partners who worked with refugees and immigrants in Chittenden County meet at first twice a week to discuss how information could be shared about the ever-changing nature of the virus and the shutdown of the State of Vermont, in a format for people who had limited English proficiency and struggled to navigate the internet.

Over the next 21 months we worked with translators to produce videos and sound files in more than ten languages

We put out our messages through WhatsApp, a free texting service, Facebook, and public access tv and case managers

working with refugees and immigrants. We put our media out through both the Winooski and Burlington School district robo call system, so in the same way you would get a message that there is a snow day, you would also now get a message for example about how the quarantine rules for testing positive for covid have changed... in your language.

Fast forward to February 2nd , 2022. We are currently writing scripts and making videos and sound files in 14 languages. ASL, Arabic, Burmese, Dari, French, English, Kirundi, Maay Maay, Nepali, Pashto Spanish, Somali, Swahili and Vietnamese. We have been able to include the Pashto and Dari languages as our new Afghan arrivals are coming to make Vermont their home.

As of today we have put out over 71 videos each in up to 14 different languages, and to date have had over 49,000 hits on our YouTube channel. Initially we just focused on Chittenden County, but since receiving the grant we are now reaching out to the whole of Vermont. So we are now including Addison County where there is a significant Spanish speaking population and are reaching out to Brattleboro in the south through the school district and the new refugee resettlement project based there.

What have we been learning?

We are learning that the demand is insatiable not only for critical health information regarding covid but also to help with navigation of children in schools.

We have just put out five different videos in our 14 languages.. Thats 70 videos in total on how to do the various rapid antigen self tests that are being used all over the state. To date, since the end of december we have had over 11,149 views of these videos. Schools are using our videos daily.

We have been told time and time again by many individuals as well as service providers our project has saved lives. If we had not been able to mobilize in the way we did so quickly, providing crucial health information in our multiple languages, I do believe many more lives would have been lost to covid.

We have learned that there is no project like ours in the country. There is no one consistently putting out information in the many languages that we have in the format that we have, about covid. Just think, when the vaccines came out in the winter of 2021, we were asked by the Department of Health in Florida if they could put our Spanish video about the vaccine on their website. Florida... wanted our Spanish video! Just last week, the Health Department of North Carolina has asked if they could share all our videos on the self-testing kits. On Sunday the Department of Health for the state of California requested use of our videos in Pashto and Dari for their new Afghan arrivals.

We have been asked if we can do videos for the department of education, the department of mental health, for housing authorities, legal services, for school districts, and for various nonprofits. Just to be clear, when I say we, it is me and my team of 11 translators who work many jobs and send me their sound files sometimes at 2 in the morning.

What do we need? The state lacks a comprehensive system and detailed language access plan where Vermonters with limited english proficiency can participate fully in the services offered by government agencies, health and education in particular but also public safety. Our method of working has been extremely successful as shown by the data I just shared. Videos and sound files, shared in a multitude of ways have saved lives and the plan needs to consider a multi pronged approach to language access

that goes beyond traditional translations on websites that few people are able to access.

So, we are working on covid, and this need has illuminated all the other needs that have never been addressed.

If you do not speak English and your doctor orders a colonoscopy, how do you know what to do if you cannot read the instructions on the medicine that they give you before you have the procedure. If your child is diagnosed with ADHD how are you going to know how best to help them if you do not have clear information about what the diagnosis means in an accessible format.

If there is an urgent statewide public safety concern or even a local one... an ice storm, a heat wave, a burst water main so that folks must not drink the water... How is that information disseminated? What languages are that information disseminated in?

We need to go beyond checking boxes... putting google translate up on our websites as the solution to engaging folks with limited English proficiency.

What do I recommend?

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- A
- detailed language access plan that is flexible in its approach to embrace the ever changing needs of the community, the community of multilingual Vermonters as well as the technology that can be used to be most effective.
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- Funding
 - - More flexibility in spending. If we are in agreement that we need to develop a comprehensive language access plan we need to fund it adequately.
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- We
 - need to design a system of delivery and build capacity so we have enough trusted translators, content developers and distribution that meets people where they are at.
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We welcome people from all over the world to Vermont. It is something that I love about this state which has been my home now for over 25 years. But we need to ensure that people who have limited English proficiency are given information in a language that they understand in a format that is accessible so that they can lead informed lives while they navigate their new homeland.